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SUBJECT: ABYEI: GOSS-SPONSORED RETURNS UPDATE

REF: KHARTOUM 481

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Summary

¶1. On April 2, USAID staff visited a reception center in Abyei town that had received approximately 3,000 Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS)-sponsored returnees from Khartoum. According to UN Mission in Sudan Return, Reintegration, and Recovery (UNMIS RRR) staff, the returnees arrived with household assets, in good health, and reported being happy to be home. As reported REFTEL, the GOSS has organized an operation to return internally displaced persons (IDPs) to areas of origin in Southern Sudan and the Three Areas prior to the April 15 census. Due to insecurity along the road from Dilling to Abyei, UNMIS provided force protection to the 74-truck convoy and ensured the returnees' safe arrival in Abyei. With the GOSS return operation in full swing, UNMIS needs to be prepared to provide force protection for other convoys traveling through Southern Kordofan to Abyei or Southern Sudan. End Summary.

ABYEI RETURNEES ARRIVE SAFELY

¶2. According to UNMIS RRR and a Southern Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (SSRRC) official, a 74-truck convoy carrying as many as 3,000 people and their household belongings from Khartoum arrived in Abyei on April 1. The returnee convoy required force protection from UNMIS due to the numerous roadblocks, armed groups, and banditry along the final stretch of road from Dilling to Abyei. According to UN officials in Abyei, mobilizing the UNMIS force protection took several days, prolonging the group's journey. (Note: The Government of National Unity, UN, and GOSS' joint organized returns program does not send returnees to Abyei due to insecurity and lack of local administration to facilitate reintegration and recovery activities. End Note.)

¶3. In preparation for the returnees, SSRRC designated a reception center in Abyei town that includes a health screening area, water bladder, and returnee registration site. On April 2, USAID staff visited the center and saw approximately ten empty trucks parked outside of the reception area and one truck full of returnees' household belongings. Most families had unloaded their belongings

and were gathered around piles of beds, chairs, and other luggage items.

14. USAID partner GOAL provided medical screening for returnees at the reception center and reported that most returnees had arrived in good health. Returnees reported one baby delivery during the journey from Khartoum. UNMIS RRR provided a water bladder at the site. An UNMIS RRR officer interviewed returnees and reported that most seemed to be in good spirits and happy to be home. The UNMIS RRR officer noted that providing assistance to the GOSS-organized returnees is difficult because the GOSS has not notified the UN of departure dates, routes, or destinations, but that the process has been relatively smooth so far. The UNMIS RRR officer reported that the Abyei SSRRC has good capacity and has organized the returnees' reception quickly and effectively. According to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) representatives in Abyei, the next GOSS-sponsored return convoy is scheduled for April 12.

OTHER COMPLICATED DISPLACEMENT DYNAMICS IN ABYEI

15. In addition to returnees from Khartoum, Abyei also has received returnees from Dibaab and Diffra areas, located north of Abyei, which UNMIS RRR characterized as extremely vulnerable. Insecurity and restricted access north of Abyei town prevents UN agencies, the SSRRC, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from thoroughly assessing the humanitarian situation of IDPs in the area and returnee populations. In recent weeks, an UNMIS RRR team identified a group of returnees in the Dibaab/Diffra area and reported high levels of malnutrition among the children. In response, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) dispatched a medical team to assist the malnourished children and provide therapeutic feeding.

16. UN agencies in Abyei lack a clear understanding of the status of the IDPs in Dibaab and Diffra, but believe many are Dinka who were displaced from Northern Bahr el Ghazal in the 1990s and remained in

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the area after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed to sharecrop in Misseriya areas. Increased tension between Dinka and Misseriya in the Muglad Area likely has prompted the Dinka IDPs to start moving southward to Abyei town.

17. UN officials also reported an unknown number of IDPs arriving in Abyei town following the fighting along the border between Southern Kordofan and Southern Sudan in recent months.

REINTEGRATION AND RETURN TO RURAL VILLAGES

18. As a policy, the UN agencies and the NGOs in Abyei do not provide assistance to returnees until they reach their final return destination. Abyei town is considered a transit point for returnees, but in fact many returnees opt to remain in Abyei because of the available services or because of insecurity in their home areas. The little town is bursting at the seams. Returnees who choose to remain in Abyei will need to be targeted with income-generation activities and vocational training opportunities to expand their livelihood options.

19. The SSRRC is responsible for registering returnees in their final return destinations and utilizes boma reception committees to conduct the registration. UNMIS RRR verifies reports and numbers from the SSRRC boma reception committees and then the UN provides food aid, relief commodities, and seeds and tools to the returnee communities based on the verified figures.

10. UN officials reported to USAID that the tracking and verification process could be slow and often included several delays due to insecurity or lack of access to villages. In general, NGOs and UN agencies can access up to 10 km outside of Abyei town, but areas beyond 10 km are almost completely inaccessible. Coverage for basic services in rural areas in the Abyei Area is low. Agencies estimated a coverage rate of between 20 to 50 percent for health and

water, sanitation, and hygiene services. Health coverage for communities in the areas off the main roads is estimated to be almost zero.

¶11. On April 2 in Abyei, relief organizations repeatedly told the USAID/Sudan Mission Director that construction of feeder roads in Abyei is crucial to improving access to basic services, stimulating economic recovery, and facilitating sustainable reintegration for returnee communities. The organizations also gave mixed messages regarding Abyei's readiness for longer-term development activities. In the meeting, some agencies stated that Abyei was still in an emergency phase, while most convincingly argued that initiating urgently needed development activities will help to stabilize a volatile and tense situation. USAID currently supports relief, transition, and development programs in Abyei but because the region has lacked a local administration, NGOs and development agencies have lacked an effective official counterpart with whom to work.

COMMENT

¶12. The GOSS-sponsored returns to Abyei town appear to be voluntary, though they are obviously actively encouraged as an integral part of GOSS/SPLM policy in advance of the census and to create "facts on the ground" by having a larger Dinka population in place in the oil-rich, contested region. The returns appear to be sufficiently supported by the SSRRRC, UNMIS RRR, and NGOs upon arrival in Abyei. UNMIS should be encouraged to stand ready to provide force protection to future GOSS-sponsored return convoys passing through Southern Kordofan State, in order to minimize delays en route for the returnees. CDA Fernandez made that point to the UNMIS Force Commander Zamcont and will do the same with SRSG Qazi.

¶13. The lack of access beyond a 10 km radius north from Abyei town is a major obstacle to sustainable reintegration into rural villages and the resumption of agricultural livelihoods. The ability of returnees, both organized and spontaneous, to establish viable livelihoods in Abyei will remain a primary concern for aid agencies. A focus on reintegration and livelihood activities targeting returnees is clearly needed in 2008. In the coming months, return, reintegration, and displacement dynamics will add another layer to the already complicated social, ethnic, and political interactions in Abyei.

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¶14. USAID is currently considering funding several new projects, such as airstrip construction, feeder roads, and vocational training, in Abyei. USAID is committed to scaling-up activity in Abyei area in the coming months, but is also cognizant of the numerous challenges of operating in this key area for CPA implementation.

FERNANDEZ